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THE GATOR--UNLOVABLE LIVING FOSSIL

The American alligator has been fighting a battle for survival against the elements, other alligators and a parade of primeval creatures for more than 100 million years.

He has endured climatic changes, mountain formations and the inundations of ancient seas. Life has been tough, but he has made it from the age of reptiles into the 20th century. Few species can boast such longevity. His enviable record of life and his gallant battle to survive have begun to wane, however, for his new and most formidable foe is man.

When white men settled in North America, alligators abounded in swamps, marshes, lakes, rivers and sloughs from North Carolina to the Everglades, from the Rio Grande Valley across the entire tier of Southern States. Now they have been reduced to the point where gators are non-existent over most of their historical range. The saurians exist in two major concentrations in the United States --- Everglades National Park in Florida and Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in southeastern Georgia, both under Federal protection.

The threat to the gator is two-pronged. His swampland home has been shrunk by spreading civilization, drainage and development. Coupled with this is the demand for products made from his hide. Together they constitute a near fatal development.

The beauty and high quality of alligator skins for shoes and handbags was first recognized late in the 19th century. Man's reckless campaign to supply the profitable "skin market" has had dire results, reminiscent of that campaign a century before when the "fur market" all but extirpated the beaver.

Without regulation or refuge protection, the gator population in Louisiana, for example, declined 90 percent from the late 1940's to the late 1950's.

The hide of an average 6-foot alligator will bring about \$30 on the market. One man can earn easily from \$150 to \$200 for a night's work--if he can find a supply of gators. And therein lies the rub.

Many States have placed alligators under protective management because of their dwindling numbers. This action has in many cases come about

10 years too late. With closed seasons, the supply of skins became limited, and price increases followed. Because of attractive prices many hunters and buyers continue to operate, knowing they are violating the law and harming the resource.

With alligators scarce and prices soaring, poachers have turned to the few wildlife sanctuaries. They use sophisticated equipment such as airplanes, airboats, two-way radios, silent, battery-powered outboard motors and high-intensity lights to blind the animals while approaching for the kill.

Poachers killed over 1,000 gators in Everglades National Park last year, and contributed to a skin trade estimated at one million dollars a year in the Miami markets alone.

What is the future for the alligator?

It was placed on the endangered species list by the U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife. Alligators are protected in all of the Bureau's National Wildlife Refuges, and in National Parks.

Bills pending in Congress would make it a Federal offense to transport alligators or their hides across State or National borders when taken in violation of State and Federal laws.

States with breeding populations of alligators are now managing the species properly. Courts are raising fines and handing jail sentences to poachers.

Some State and Federal agencies have started research programs to study alligator habits and life requirements. With remaining wetlands under slow but steady reduction, such facts will be essential to intensive management and preservation of the gator.

But why be concerned for this unlovable prehistoric monster?

Because they are part of life. Alligators play a key role in the life of the swamp. Each adult maintains a hole, digging out the peat bog on the marshy "floor"--and clearing a small pond on the surface. These "holes" provide protection not only for the gator, but produce great quantities of food for birds, small mammals, fish and turtles. Often during a drought, gator holes provide the only water and make the difference between life and death for swamp life. They are great scavengers and earn the title of swamplands' sanitary engineers. They also assist in controlling roughfish and turtles.

Although a voracious creature in nature, alligators exhibit great timidity towards man. Despite the legends they do not attack humans unless molested.

These odd, interesting reptiles add much to the wildlife of a primitive

swamp. They have a natural right to exist in contemporary America, and Americans have an obligation to insure that this right is not abridged. They were here long before man walked the earth; they should be here for the delight of unborn generations.

